

February 3, 2013

A Sermon Preached by
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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF DELRAY BEACH

The Community Church by the Sea

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Where Forgiveness Begins

Matthew 6:9-15

Will You Pray With Me?

Our gracious God, every one of us have gathered in this place, hungry for good news. Many of us have been made weary by the daily grind of life. Others have grown discouraged by disappointments. Some of us are simply looking for a hopeful word. All of us need to be reminded again of Your forgiveness. Grant this morning what we need. More, we ask that You fill us with Your grace in such measure that we may forgive those who desperately need our forgiveness. In the strong Name of Jesus, we pray. Amen.

One of the most effective preachers I know is Thomas Sewell. During his ministry as pastor of the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City, he once said, "If our greatest need had been for information, God would have sent us an educator. If our greatest need had been for technology, God would have sent us a scientist. If our greatest need had been for money, God would have sent us an economist. If our greatest need had been for pleasure, God would have sent us an entertainer. But our greatest need is for forgiveness, so God sent us a Savior."

We conclude this morning with our careful examination of The Lord's Prayer. As we come to the end of this prayer,

Jesus teaches us to pray, "Forgive us as we forgive others." What Jesus wants us to hear is that if we are to pray with power we must be continually be about the hard work of reconciling our relationship with God and with one another.

Personally, I find the first part of that not so difficult, "Forgive me, O God." It is the second part, "As I forgive others," that is the difficult part. To look at someone who has wronged me, hurt me, betrayed me and speak the words that I forgive them is hard. Yet, Jesus teaches here in The Lord's Prayer that if we are to pray with uncommon power, both are absolutely necessary; asking for forgiveness and offering forgiveness to others.

How do we do that? How do we begin to forgive those who have done us harm? I submit that we can't unless we recall, over and over again, that there is something wrong with us. Every one of us stands before the throne of grace in need of forgiveness. It is difficult to forgive until we recall our own need for forgiveness. Friends, that is where forgiveness begins, with the recognition of our own need for forgiveness. That is why Jesus' instruction begins, "Forgive me, O God."

Can we be honest enough with each

other to say that the reason we often forget our need for forgiveness is because we are so focused on the behavior of others? Imagine with me this possibility I heard some years ago from a pastor in Texas. You are at the Palm Beach International Airport and you purchase a small package of cookies to enjoy on your plane ride. The flight is delayed so you move toward a Starbucks near your gate. You decide that you will enjoy your cookies with a cup of coffee during the delay. Every table is occupied but there is one chair open at a table where one person is already seated. You sit down across from them and decide to read a book you brought along for the trip.

There you are, seated at a Starbucks with your coffee, your package of cookies and a good book. Then you see the person across from you reach into your package of cookies and take one and enjoy it. You are mildly disturbed at this but decide to ignore it. You take a cookie and continue to read your book. Then it happens again. The other person helps themselves to another one of your cookies. Now you are angry but you remember that you are a member of First Presbyterian Church of Delray Beach and that you have recently heard a sermon on forgiveness. You let it go without saying anything.

Sitting quietly together each of you continues to take cookies from the package until only one is left. The person seated across from you offers to break the last cookie in half and share it with you. You politely refuse, stand and leave the table. You have decided that it would be best to return to the gate before you say

something you would regret.

You continue to read your book and enjoy the last of your coffee. Then the announcement is made that boarding will now begin. You close your book and begin to place it into your carry-on bag. That is when you discover in your bag is your package of cookies! Someone wasn't eating your cookies. You were eating someone else's cookies. Often we fail to see our great need because we are so focused on the behavior of others.

During the Civil War Abraham Lincoln received numerous requests for forgiveness and pardon. One request stood apart from the others because it lacked both references and letters of recommendations. Lincoln asked a member of his cabinet, "Has this man no friends?" "No, Mr. President, he does not." "Then today I will be his friend." Lincoln signed the request for a pardon. Do not forget that we all stand before the throne of Almighty God with no references or letters of recommendation. Yet, in the stroke of a cross God declares that he will be our friend and grants us a pardon in the person of Jesus.

At the death of Copernicus, that great pioneer of science, his family had these words placed on his tombstone, "I ask not the grace accorded to Paul, nor that given to Peter. Give me only the favor which you did show to the thief on the cross."¹ Copernicus recognized his great need for forgiveness. That is where the forgiveness of others begins. Amen.

¹John Sutherland Bonnell, "The Origin of the Universe," *What Are You Living For?* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1950), 66.